

Be Committed to Buddhism and All Living Beings

Written by Pan Xuan
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Tzu Chi was founded on the basis of one sentence: "Be committed to Buddhism and all living beings." If you ask me who has had the most influence on me, I will say it was my dharma master.

--Master Cheng Yen

The above sentence was quoted during a significant meeting that took place in 1963 at the Huiji Lecture Hall in Taipei. The purpose of the meeting was to prepare for the precept-granting ceremony which was to be held in February of the same year at Linji Temple in Taipei. Male and female novices would flock to the temple for a 32-day novitiate in order to become full-fledged members of the Buddhist congregation.

A young female novice who had recently shaved off her own hair [this is usually done by one's dharma master] arrived in Taipei the day before the ceremony. She first went to Linji Temple to register for the ceremony, and then she went to the Huiji Lecture Hall. It was there that she first met Master Yin Shun.

Master Yin Shun, popularly called "the Mentor," recalled that he was living in the Huiji Lecture Hall at the time when a nun named Hui Yin first brought the female novice to meet him. They exchanged greetings, and then the young novice went to the bookstore to buy the complete collection of books by Master Tai Xu. Hui Yin told Master Yin Shun that the novice had come to Taipei from Hualien especially to receive her Buddhist precepts in order to become a nun. She continued to explain that before departing from Hualien, the young novice had first shaved off her hair by herself, without formally taking refuge with a Buddhist master. Therefore, it would be impossible for her to attend the ceremony, since all novices were required to have dharma masters. When someone had tried to explain to the novice that she could simply ask any master present at the Linji Temple to accept her as a disciple, she had refused. She did not want to find a mentor so hastily, and so she decided to buy a collection of Master Tai Xu's books and return to Hualien.

However, after she had bought the collection, it started to rain heavily and she couldn't leave. While she was waiting for the downpour to stop, she told Hui Yin that she would very much like to take refuge with the old master, although actually he rarely accepted disciples.

At this point in his story, Master Yin Shun laughed. "I wasn't good at talking, and I didn't know why she had chosen me, but I agreed anyway. I then gave her a Buddhist name, Cheng Yen, and I told her to return to Linji Temple immediately because the registration for the novitiate would be closing very soon."

Master Cheng Yen recalled the same scenario, adding that after she had knelt down to take refuge with Master Yin Shun, the old master had told her that their meeting was a rare chance for both of them. He couldn't talk to her much because the registration time was drawing to a close. But then he told Cheng Yen to bear one phrase in mind: "Be committed to Buddhism and

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all living beings." "I was shocked," recalled Master Cheng Yen. "It took my master less than a second to utter this short phrase, and yet I have spent the last four decades doing my best to uphold it!"

The Mentor, who had been sitting in a quiet room at the Abode of Jing Si throughout the interview, remembered why he had accepted Master Cheng Yen as a disciple: "She had bought the collection of Master Tai Xu's books, so I agreed to accept her. Master Tai Xu wasn't my master, but I still regard him as my teacher. Anyway, worldly events are sometimes beyond our comprehension. None of us can explain the incredible conditions that may directly or indirectly change our lives."

Master Cheng Yen recalled why she had bought the collection. "I had heard that if anyone could read Master Tai Xu's books, it would be like reading the pure essence of the Buddha's philosophy."

So it was to be that a collection of books was the mystical link that connected three generations of teachers and disciples over two different centuries. What an incredible chance!

In 1966, the Mentor was hired to teach at the Chinese Culture College. In the same year, Master Cheng Yen established the Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation in eastern Taiwan.

While the Mentor was teaching the Buddha's wisdom at the college as the first-ever Buddhist monk-professor in Taiwan, his disciple, Master Cheng Yen, started her Tzu Chi Foundation with a base of 30 housewives. They helped the poor and the sick, woke up the Great Love in people's hearts, and attracted growing numbers to join the new charity foundation.

Master Cheng Yen once said that her master was devoted in his quest to promote Mahayana Buddhism. Master Yin Shun emphasized not only the principles of Buddhism, but also the importance of putting them into practice. That was the flowing spring that nourished Master Cheng Yen's charitable deeds.

That rainstorm, the collection of books, the Buddhist name, and the old master's succinct instruction--these would combine to create a stream of compassion that would flow throughout the entire Tzu Chi world.□

Translated by Lin Sen-shou
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